



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

## **REALISM IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM**

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## **REALISM IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM**

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This project is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Art with Honours  
(Cinematography)

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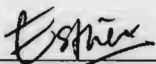
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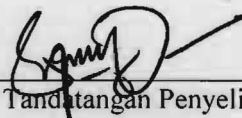
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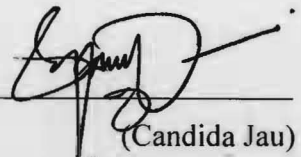
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The project entitled **Realism in Ethnographic Film: ‘Silence Must Be Heard’** was prepared by **Esther Bala** and submitted to the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours (Cinematography).

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## Abstract

The main aim of this thesis is to explore the notion of realism in ethnographic film. It has been suggested that the idea of realism in ethnographic film is imperative in that it can represent the realities of people's life and culture. But nonetheless, this raises the question of whether it is possible for a filmmaker to represent these realities without being subjective. Furthermore, it is argued that one's subject matter do react differently when confronted by filmmakers' very own tools - the camera. This inevitably can reduce the degree of realism in the film. This research reveals that these problems can be reduced in order to maintain a certain degree of realism in an ethnographic film. Specifically in the case of this research is the application of two interrelated but distinct approaches in film making, namely, Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema. The application of both methods enables a film maker to capture a certain degree of reality at real location and of ordinary people. This is affirmed by the final result of this research titled 'Silence Must Be Heard', an ethnographic film of the *Pa Tik Penan* life style known as *Molong, in Bario*. This project suggests that ethnographic film still reliable as a means to capture every day life of people.

## **Abstrak**

*Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyingkap aspek realisme dalam filem etnografi. Idea realisme penting dalam filem etnografi kerana ia boleh menggambarkan keadaan kehidupan sesebuah masyarakat dan budaya mereka. Namun begitu, pembikin filem hari ini lebih subjektif dalam memaparkan subjek mereka, dengan mengetengahkan sesuatu isu yang dialami oleh subjek. Terdapat dua kaedah penyampaian yang boleh digunakan dalam menghasilkan filem etnografi iaitu Cinema Verite dan Direct Cinema. Melalui kaedah ini, pembikin filem berpeluang merakam realiti kehidupan seharian masyarakat (subjek) di lokasi penempatan yang sebenarnya. Oleh itu, kajian ini telah mendorong pengkaji untuk menghasilkan sebuah filem etnografi tentang jenis kehidupan Molong oleh kaum Pa Tik Penan di Bario.*

## Chapter 1

### 1.0 Introduction

The invention of film and video camera make it possible for filmmakers to capture movement and sound of living objects. Advancement in technologies enables the filmmakers to explore their creativity and skill, and make it possible for them to capture and record objects of interest, including people. As a tool, film and video camera bring the outside world to the door of the viewers.

Capturing and recording people's way of life on film, usually known as ethnographic film, today is increasingly becomes a new method for ethnographers to record their observations of object of interest instead of writing about them.

But what is recording people's ways of life means in film making? In general it means Documentary Film which can be defined as, 'a non-fiction film, usually photographed on location, using actual people rather than actors and actual events rather than scripted stories.'<sup>1</sup> Documentary films also present factual information about the world (Bordwell and Thompson, 1993). Oxford Dictionary Advanced Learner's defines documentary as 'a film or a radio or television program giving facts about something. Documentary consisting of documents: documentary evidence/source/materials. Giving a record or report of the fact about something, especially by using pictures, recordings and extra of people involved' (2000, pg.390)

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<sup>1</sup>FilmGlossary, available from  
<[http://www.raritanval.edu/departments/CommLanguage/fulltime/valasek/AmFilm\\_glossary.htm](http://www.raritanval.edu/departments/CommLanguage/fulltime/valasek/AmFilm_glossary.htm)>;  
Internet accessed 15 September 2005

Documentary Film has vast subjects, for instance a documentary about nature, history, adventure, events happening around the world and people ways of life. In Documentary Film, Ethnographic Film is one of its subset (Loizos, 1993) which focuses on presenting the factual information about people and their culture. Ethnographic Film is an '...anthropological film that records and perhaps comments on an ethnic group and its culture'<sup>2</sup>. It is '...to establish an objective and analytical depiction of a specific culture. ...the type of documentary film that attempts to fully disclose one culture to another, treating all the data of the 'new found' culture effectively, openly and fairly as if from the prospective of a member of that community'<sup>3</sup> According to Jay Ruby, one of the criteria of Ethnographic Films is '...they should be films about whole cultures...' (1975, cited in Loizos, 1993, p.9) Karl Heider defines an Ethnographic Film as a film that reveals 'the whole bodies, and whole people, in whole acts.' (Loizos, 1993, p7)

Ethnographic Film can be divided into four categories. Firstly, Ethnographic film is about the custom and habits of certain group of people, which includes their daily life, portraits, social organization and health. Secondly, it is about the religion of the community, the rituals, initiators, death and its rites, spirits, possessions, exorcism, pilgrimages, orientation mysticism and festivities. The third category is the technical ways of the community; the techniques of production, craft in society, the language of

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<sup>2</sup> Film Glossary, available from  
<[http://www.raritanval.edu/departments/CommLanguage/fulltime/valasek/AmFilm\\_glossary.htm](http://www.raritanval.edu/departments/CommLanguage/fulltime/valasek/AmFilm_glossary.htm)>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005

<sup>3</sup> FilmGlosarry, available from  
<<http://video.barnesandnoble.com/search/glossary.asp?userid=Id5PIWBCQX&CAT=1005877&TRM=1006184>>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005

gesture, agriculture, hunting and fishing. Lastly, it is about the traditional culture, which includes the carnivals and feast, music and dance, music and people, the making of the instrument, straight documentary, about their theatre, the locals' traditions, sculpture and painting, tales and legend. (French Production 1998)

If Ethnographic Film is about people and their culture, are these films only can be produced by an ethnographer or an anthropologist? Any individual especially filmmakers can produce Ethnographic Film. However the filmmaker has to base the film on the reality of the peoples' way of life. To stay true to the subject, a filmmaker cannot create a way of life (culture) for her/his subject to act with an aim to make the film more interesting. The issue of realism needs to be considered in any ethnographic film because it is not ethical to create something which is not truthful about somebody and about a community.

## **1.1 Objective**

This study on Penan way of life aims to highlight the notion of realism in the ethnographic filmmaking. It aims to explore new methods to present reality of a society or a community in films.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

In Ethnographic Films, the notion or realism is questioned, whether the films really present the reality of people's ways of life. Realism is defined in art and literature as an '...artistic genres that emphasize the subject rather than the director's point of view.

Realism in film and two-dimensional art forms often content with contemporary issues of social...'<sup>4</sup> In Oxford Advance Learner's, Dictionary, Realism has two definitions. Firstly it is defines as a way of seeing, accepting and dealing with situations as they really are without being influenced by your emotions or false hopes. Secondly, Realism is about the quality of being very like real life, and, it is defines as a style in art or literature that shows things and people as they are in real life. Nichol stated that the importance of realism is to '...build upon presentation of thing as they appear to eye and ear in everyday life... presents life, life as lived and observed.'(Loizos, 1993, p.9) To presents what is appear to the eyes and to the ears of the filmmakers, camera and sound recorder are the best and suitable tools. With these elements, the viewers will know other culture or the outside world that they have not seen or heard. The camera and sound recorder can increase the concept of realism in Ethnographic Films. However, the concept of realism is questioned, below are some of the concerns:

Filmmakers have becoming aware of their subject matter and become self-conscious. When a filmmaker had spent a lot of time with their subject, they get to know the subject well or the community's culture in and out. Because of this, it causes the filmmakers to act on behalf of the community. Instead of letting the community speaking off their mind, the filmmakers tell them what to say and what to do in the film. In the end, there is no Ethnographic Films, but films about hidden issues in the community that the film makers want to expose. One of the examples of some ethnographic films that has fell into this is the N!ai: the story of a !Kung woman (1980) by John Marshal and

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<sup>4</sup>FilmGlossary,available from

<<http://video.barnesandnoble.com/search/glossary.asp?userid=Id5PIWBCQX&CAT=1005877&TRM=1006184>>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005



Andrienne Linden. As Loizos mentioned in his book, '...Marshal and his film seem aware and self-conscious about what has happened to the !Kung, and to be fighting on their behalf'<sup>5</sup> When a filmmaker becomes aware of the subject matter, she or he can design the film according to her or his need. Therefore, realism has become a secondary concept.

Designing the outcome of the film leads for more influences by the filmmakers than the subject matter. One of the main problems face by the filmmakers is the tendency to be obsessed or personal with their film especially with the issue they want to present. In a film called To Live with Herds: A dry season among the Jie (1971) (Loizos, 1993, p94) by MacDougalls, is obviously showing the inclusion of the filmmaker's prospective about the changes in the social structure made by the British government with Jie people. The film suggesting that the Jie people are hungry because they have to pay tax, a new policy introduces by the British. However questions arises about the reality of this film, were the Jie people really hungry because they have to pay tax, or, was it because of the dry season which make it difficult to plant crops. (Loizos 1993) Therefore, when a filmmaker has become very subjective through their approach, the concept of realism is blurred.

Another problem faces in shooting the reality in Ethnographic Films is the subject matter reaction towards the camera. There is interaction between the camera or filmmaker's tool and the subject matter. The subject matter will become self-conscious or aware that she/he is being recording and this will make them act differently.

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<sup>5</sup>Peter Loizos, *Innovation in ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness 1955-1985*, (Manchester University Press, 1993) 79

According to Bohr's theory as stated by Andrejs Apsitis, the theory explains the behaviour of subject can be influenced by the presence of camera. '...when the behaviour of an atomic micro-object is measured, the very presence of the researcher's tool influences the behaviour of the object investigated'<sup>6</sup> If the object is influenced, is there any reality in the film?

Every filmmaker wants their audience to stick to their film. They try to make the film more interesting and dramatic in order to keep the attention of the audience. This is because showing reality and a lot of information could be tedious to watch. For these reasons, there are a few realist have turned their back from the concept of realism. One good example is Robert Gardner who is appreciated in making ethnographic film and most of his films are studied by ethnographic film student (Loizos 1993). Gardner's film Blunden Harbour (1951) (Loizos 1993, p.142) is the landmark of his antirealism, 'It was marked of its non-realistic, non-descriptive, evocative and elusive style and its studied pectoris qualities'<sup>7</sup> Gardner believes that ethnographic film can attract audience by showing the impulse of the culture, using an unusual style in filming the film. To be able to do this, a filmmaker has to have a deep understanding of the culture and the condition of the community. With this deep understanding, the filmmaker can design the film to capture the reality of the culture (Loizos 1993).

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<sup>6</sup> Andrejs, Andrejs. Records of Documenatary Film Symposium - Niels Bohr and the Film Theory of Documentary Film. Available from <<http://www.latfilma.lv/symposium/1197/4sim12.html>>; Internet accessed 2 August 2005

<sup>7</sup> Peter Loizos, *Innovation in ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness 1955-198.* (Manchester University Press, 1993), 142

Based on the issues above, questions arise about the importance of realism in ethnographic film; whether the concept of realism is really applied in making of ethnographic film. If the concept of realism is not being used, do the films still showing the reality of the community. If not, what actually is happening behind the camera? Will it possible to capture what is happening behind the camera?

Although the concept of Realism is very important in making an Ethnographic Film, the filmmakers could not avoid using fiction's approach to produce a non-fiction film. However, the filmmakers need to keep in track that all actions unfolding in front of the camera are according to the culture of the subject matter. The filmmakers have to avoid of falling into adding actions or ways of life which are not practice among the subject matters. He may not direct them to influence their feeling or emotion, but to always remember that, Ethnographic Films are about reality of the subject matter's culture and their life. It is acceptable to make a non-fiction film by applying fictional elements in order to keep the subject matter and their culture lively, just as Gardner's said. This can make the film become more interesting to watch.

### **1.3 Research Methodology**

The study started with library research with the aim to understand the concept of realism and what Ethnographic and Documentary films are. Watching ethnographic films from documentaries channel has helped the study to understand more about ethnographic film and the concept of realism.

To complement this study, an Ethnographic Film about a family of *Penan*, one of the indigenous tribes in Borneo will be produced. To make the film successful, researcher will apply the Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema method which is developed by Jean Rouch and Albert Maysles. This method is suitable to capture the reality of the subject because it limits the filmmaker's influence. The researcher will take the tools to the location to record and capture the real subject and the real location. This is to keep a high degree of realism in the film.

## Chapter 2

### 2.0 Development of Ethnographic Film

During the first existence of cinema in 1890's, the films were literally documentaries, showing the actuality of what is happening in front of the camera. It is a very simple approach and normally with one single-shot. Take for example the Lumière brothers' films, Workers Leaving Factory and a Train Entering A Station.

Later documentary films were used to critic, give ideology and propaganda of politic and social issue, particularly during the World War I. During this time documentary films had moved into a new purpose, not only as entertainment but also to do services for the government, promoting the government propaganda and ideology. However at the same time documentary films could be a treat to government, because it also can be used to expose hidden activities.

In 1922, one of the most important documentary films was directed by Robert Flaherty entitled, Nanook of the North<sup>8</sup>. It is a documentary film about an Eskimo family who lives in the Hudson Bay of Canada. Nanook of the North achieves a new development; that is a Documentary Film can be created to be genuine form of art. This development becomes an aspiration for film makers in France and Germany to combine documentary with modernist form. Some of the examples of this generation form of Documentary Films are, Rien que les heures (1926) by Alberto Cavalcanti, Berlin: die

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<sup>8</sup>Encyclopedia of the documentary Film, Three-Volume set, available from <<http://www.routledge-ny.com/ref/documentary/introduction.html>>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005

Symphonie der Grosstadt (1929) by Walter Ruttmann, Grass (1925) and Chang (1928) by Schoedsack and Coopers with their respective account of the tribulation of Iranian and Siamese peasant life and Turksib (1925) by Victor Turin about the story of building railway in Siberia.<sup>9</sup>

In the year of 1930 to 1945 another historical development in the documentary film had happened. Individual authors emerged by increasing the use of documentary film in social and politic. The emergence of the individual authors had made the filmmakers become more subjective, by stressing and focusing on their point of view. This became a new genre in Documentary Films. In the United States, Europe and Britain few individuals became prominence in making documentary film such as Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz from the United States, Joris Ivens, Henri Storck, Pare Lorentz and Ivor Montagu from Europe. In Britain, John Grierson stirred few film makers such as Paul Rotha, Alberto Cavalcanti, Basil Wright and Humphrey Jennings<sup>10</sup>. This genre apparently influenced the nature of Ethnographic Films, where filmmakers become more subjective. They focus on the hidden issues rather than the subject matter.

The emergence of Documentary Films into this new genre had successfully turned Robert Gardner into an anti realist and brought the ethnographic film into a new level. He produced more subjective films, to influence the audiences' opinion not on the subject matter but on the issues of the subject matter, particularly in his documentary film

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<sup>9</sup>Encyclopedia of the documentary Film, Three-Volume set, available from <<http://www.routledge-ny.com/ref/documentary/introduction.html>>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005

<sup>10</sup>Encyclopedia of the documentary Film, Three-Volume set, available from <<http://www.routledge-ny.com/ref/documentary/introduction.html>>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005

entitled the Dead Birth (1963). This is about the Dani people who dwell in the Grand Valley of the Baliem high in the mountains of West Irian. William Rothman stated,

*Dead Birds*...are sublime and beautiful poems in which each society Gardner films becomes a metaphor for the tenderness and cruelty of all human existence, the tenderness and cruelty we are all capable of recognizing when we look deep into our own hearts. Gardner's "ethnographic" films are about people he does not claim to especially to love. The human need for love, which is the other face of the human resistance to loving and being loved, is the subject of his films...<sup>11</sup>

One of the most important ground-breaking in the non-fiction film was introduced by Jean Rouch. It is called as *Cinéma Vérité*, means 'true cinema'. Cinema Verite is a method of film making, which was developed in 1960s in France. It is a movement in the non-fiction film that grew from the concept of realism. This development brought a new way to capture reality especially in the making of an Ethnographic Films and other Documentary Film genres. Robert Flaherty is also often seen as an ancestor to *cinéma vérité*,<sup>12</sup> he took his camera to Hudson Bay and shot the Eskimos people and followed

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<sup>11</sup> Documentary Educational Resources, Documentary Film, DEAD BIRDS, available at

<<http://www.der.org/films/dead-birds.html>>; Internet accessed 12 November 2005

<sup>12</sup>*cinéma vérité* from Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, available from< <http://www.routledge-ny.com/ref/documentary/introduction.html>>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005

<sup>13</sup>*cinéma vérité* from Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, available from< <http://www.routledge-ny.com/ref/documentary/introduction.html>>; Internet accessed 15 September 2005



them around. The method of *Cinéma Vérité* 'aims for an extreme naturalism, using non-professional actors, non-intrusive filming techniques, frequent use of hand-held camera, the use of genuine locations rather than sound stages, and naturalistic sound without post-production'<sup>13</sup>.

Another method which is similar to Cinema Verite, emerged in America, called Direct Cinema, '...characteristically records an on going event as it happen'(Bordwell and Thompson,1993, p.112) Direct cinema is developed by Albert Mayles (Stubbs, 2002). He works together with his brother David in making documentary by using handheld camera and letting events unfold in front of the camera. Mayles believes that interview can make a documentary becomes more subjective because it is scripted and the filmmaker will only get setup information.

Cinema Verite and Direct Cinema are similar methods of producing non-fiction film. Both methods require the filmmakers to take their tools to the original location and shoot the subject. However these two methods can be distinguished from each other. In an article, Candis Callison cited Erik Barnouw's statement, a leading documentary historian as 'both direct cinema and cinema verite had a distinct democratizing effect by putting real people in front of the camera and revealing aspects of life never before captured on film'<sup>14</sup> The different between both methods are clear, which is,

Cinema Verite uses the power of the camera to provoke and reveal.

Direct Cinema, on the other hand, is more strictly observational. It

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<sup>13</sup> Truth in Cinema [http://web.mit.edu/candis/www/callison\\_truth\\_cinema.htm](http://web.mit.edu/candis/www/callison_truth_cinema.htm) Internet Excessed 19 April 2006.



Relies on an agreement among the filmmaker, subjects, and audience

To act as *if* the presence of the camera does not (substantially) alter the recorded event.<sup>15</sup>

The emergence of this genre in documentary film became possible because of development in the technology. Bob Drew and D.A Pennebaker, who engineered the sync-sound-recording equipment, make it possible for ethnographers and documentary filmmakers to record the activities and the sound of their subject matter at the original location more accurately on film.

The development in technology has made *cinéma vérité* or direct cinema movement becoming an artistic development. Cameras had become small enough to be portable and unobtrusive, and can record sound at the same time. The link between cameras and recorders has freed filmmakers, especially documentary filmmakers to capture and record reality whenever they want and wherever they go. The method of *cinema vérité* and direct cinema is the suitable way to produce an Ethnographic Film, because this method will keep the reality in the film strong and firm.

Mayles believes that a high value of film production is achieved when a filmmaker is capturing other people's life experience directly (Stubbs 2002). Because of this, he really disagrees when film critics downgrading the trustworthy of a documentary film, by questioning the reaction of the object with the camera and the crew. Critics

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<sup>15</sup> Direct Cinema [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct\\_Cinema](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct_Cinema) internet accessed 19 April 2006

believe that the object may react differently in front a camera. However, Mayles is convinced that this problem will not happen if the filmmaker knows how to use the tools.

One of the great, important and useful ingredients to make film about people is to have empathy on your subject. When you empathize, you will grow to love the subject. When you love your subject, you will accept them for who they are without having negative judgment upon them. For loving your subject, you do not want to make the people you filming look different from their real life. You will not make them better or worst than what they are. Having this kind of attitude towards the subjects will keep the concept of reality in the film.

Another important ethic to do film about people is that, the filmmaker should know how to approach her/his subject matter. One of the ways to avoid the subject from being camera shy is, to gaze at the subject in correct way. This is supported by Stefan Jarl in his statement saying, 'A good documentary is only as good as the rapport between the people in front of the camera and the people behind it. Bad relationships make bad film'.<sup>16</sup>

To be a direct cinema filmmaker, it is important to have an open mind for other things during the filming, by not only sticking to the initial idea. In nature, a direct cinema method is to observe the subject and capture the events unfold in front of the camera. It is worth to be opened minded, because the unplanned events might be more

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Tobias, ed. *The Search For reality: The art Of Documentary Filmmaking* (Michael Wiese productions. 1998), 151

interesting than the planned idea. Moreover, this will keep a high degree of realism in the film.

## **2.1 Realism in Ethnographic Film**

As the years pass, the documentary becomes an issue for discussion, whether it still presenting the fact information about this world. This is because a documentary film actually, can be influenced by the filmmakers themselves. So, the factuality of the film is questioned whether it is still trustworthy or is the film worthy to be called documentary.

The earliest theorist of documentary films such as Grierson and Rotha argued that documentary film only present real information, and claimed that a documentary film has integrity because it only reveal the real world. Grierson and Rotha argued forcefully about the fundamental different between fiction and non-fiction or documentary, 'with documentary being assigned a greater truthfulness, and accordingly, a superior moral character' (Loizos, 1993, p.5). In deed this is true if the definition is applied to the first film ever made by Lumiere brothers, Louis and Auguste Workers leaving the factory with their first camera and function as a projector at the same time. The first show of their film was projected on a screen for the public in 1895. This short 35mm film was the first film ever made in the form of documentary because it reveals factual information.

As the years pass, technology develops and influences the making of films. Filmmakers found the beauty of combining different shots that bring different meaning which make the film become more interesting. The development in technology makes it possible for filmmakers to produce fiction film which in the end became a threat to the

non-fiction film. To compete with the fiction film, documentary filmmakers also need to apply the same way the fiction filmmakers producing their films. According to Nichols '...many authors have stressed element in documentaries which resemble fiction films- the use of narrative suspense and closure, and of continuity shooting and editing being most obvious'.<sup>17</sup>

By using the same method in producing both genres, the boundary between fiction and non-fiction film becoming unclear. In an article by Brian Witson, he mentioned that 'The line between documentary and fiction film is tenuous. Both are created by editing and selection. Both wittingly and unwittingly, embody a viewpoint'.<sup>18</sup> However in another statement, Nichol had revised his earlier critics on filmmakers using fiction elements to make a non-fiction films.

'...in spite the similarities that mention, still there are more important different between fiction and documentary. For example, fiction films – seek to involve us by creating an imaginary world which is sufficiently like the world we (think we) know, they relate to historical (real) world only obliquely and metaphorically. Documentaries, however, although they cannot be simple, unmediated carbon-copies of reel-world events, at the level of heir images (and the evidentiary potential of those images) retain that Nichols

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Loizos, *Innovation in ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness 1955-1985*. (Manchester University Press, 1993), 5

<sup>18</sup> Peter Loizos, *Innovation in ethnographic film. From innocence to self-consciousness 1955-1985*. (Manchester University Press, 1993), 6